

USING AUTOETHNOGRAPHY TO REFRAME AN 'ADMINISTRATIVE ACCIDENT' AS AN 'ADMINISTRATIVE EXPERIMENT'

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Abstract

Although leadership changes can occur with substantial advance notice, such shifts are sometimes more abrupt. When unforeseen leadership vacancies arise in educational institutions, faculty can serve in temporary or interim capacities to fill them. Informed by my experiences with unexpected shifts in leadership, I use autoethnography to explore the challenges of serving as an interim department head with scant preparation. Autoethnography is a form of narrative methodology that sees the author connect their personal experience to a broader cultural phenomenon through self-reflection and meaning-making. The dominant challenges uncovered in this autoethnography are consistent with the literature on the training and development needs of department heads. My reflexive analysis identifies several learning themes: conditional acceptance, exit strategy, and 'North Star' faculty leadership. These concepts helped reframe my interim department chair experiences: Instead of an 'administrative accident' that I sought to avoid, I took part in an 'administrative experiment' that refreshed my career focus. Furthermore, these revelations combine with findings from the literature on department heads to call for an increase in intentional preparation by implementing ongoing training and development opportunities.

Keywords: autoethnography, department head, department chair, training, development

JEL Classification: I23, M12, J24

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2018, I begrudgingly became an interim department head. It was a stressful situation – I had received no prior or concurrent training for the role, and it was the longest year of my career. Today, when people ask if I want to become an administrator again, I politely decline. Still, revisiting my past as an interim department head can provide valuable insights. In the work of Murphy (2022), I identified the positives and negatives of holding this position and suggested improvement practices. I genuinely believed I had harvested all the value from that experience and moved on. However, a serendipitous literature search introduced me to the autoethnographic work of Learmonth and Humphreys (2012). I realised there was more to learn through the autoethnographic self-reflection of my time as an interim department chair.

Learmonth and Humphreys (2012) utilised the concept of duality via the literary characters of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde to explore their own academic and organisational identities in the context of their attendance at a more traditional educational conference (e.g., formal business attire, a large number of attendees, conventional research methods, and lavish hotel event space) and a less traditional academic conference (e.g., informal attire, a small number of attendees, less traditional research methods, and humble college setting). Comparing their experiences to the characters of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde – competing personalities of the same man – enabled the researchers to explore their multitudinous academic identities at these conferences using a mix of evocative and analytical autoethnography. Their approach intrigued me: I was captivated by their autoethnographic approach, which I encountered as idiosyncratic and personal, allowing an exploration of identity in a completely novel

manner. According to Learmonth and Humphreys (2012), autoethnography deemed their personal experiences worthy of inquiry and research and encouraged them to use themselves as 'objects of research'. A subsequent search of the literature guided me to the work of Bochner and Ellis (2016) on teaching autoethnography at an academic workshop. Their writing, simultaneously clever and insightful, exudes heart and emotion – all aspects less commonly discussed at the business schools I have attended. Inspired by this literature, I have approached this paper as a work of autoethnography that addresses my past transition from a faculty member to an interim department head and faculty member to explore selected challenges of serving in an administrative role with scant preparation. In some ways, this exploration resembles returning to the scene of an 'administrative accident' – an unplanned experience I did not seek and tried my best to avoid.

2. METHODOLOGY

Rooted in ethnography and narrative analysis, autoethnography is a method that employs intellect and emotion to explore the intersections between a person's experience and society, aiming to make life better in some way (Adams et al., 2015; Cooper and Lilyea, 2021; Learmonth and Humphreys, 2012; Poulos, 2021). Usually written in the first person, autoethnography is qualitative, phenomenological, situated in local knowledge, evocatively written, interpretive, suggestive, and subjective, based on memories, narrative, and the search for possibilities (Bochner and Ellis, 2016; Poulos, 2021).

A review of autoethnographic literature shows no singular approach to this method (Adams et al., 2015; Bochner and Ellis, 2016; Cooper and Lilyea, 2022; Poulos, 2021). Some

common elements include a focus, data, analysis, results and discussion. Focus represents a point of inquiry. Data comes from journals or personal notes that capture feelings, events, or conversations. Reflexive introspection is a form of data analysis. The results of that analysis are self-reflexive learning themes. There is a discussion of the themes, connections to a broader context and implications for the author, readers, and organisations or communities (Cooper and Lilyea, 2022; Poulos, 2021). My focus is exploring the challenge of serving in an administrative role with scant preparation. My autoethnographic data comes from personal notes and emails that capture my thoughts, events, and conversations. The data forms the basis of my two-part autoethnography.

Because autoethnography uses personal experiences as data, I mistakenly thought I could quickly write a paper utilising this methodology without difficulty. However, I struggled to execute the basic steps of autoethnography. I needed more information about the process, and I searched for a source presenting itself as an 'autoethnography for apprentices' – guidelines that might break down this method for novices. This led me to the work of Cooper and Lilyea (2021), which defines and illustrates the building blocks of autoethnography in an enlightening and demystifying manner, distilling the critical components of the genre and offering examples in accessible language. Still, the process of writing my autoethnography was not smooth – scattered instead with continuous interruptions. During one of the periods when I was struggling with writing, I located Weege's (2022) autoethnographic work concerning the twists and turns of being a doctoral student. What struck me was her use of the autoethnographic method to reframe what she formerly considered 'life obstacles' as 'life experiences'. This eventually led her to develop the necessary academic maturity and personal readiness to restart a doctoral programme (Weege, 2022). I took solace in her non-linear experience and was eager to begin self-reflection of my past transition from an associate professor to an interim department head, thereby expanding my experience as something beyond an 'administrative accident'.

After sharing my data or autoethnography, I discern how my department head experience aligns with the literature on department head training and development. This expands the focus from my personal involvement to a broader phenomenon, a critical component of the autoethnographic method. Then, I examine my autoethnography through reflexive introspection to uncover and discuss learning themes. The final step develops conclusions and implications—individual and organisational practices—to enhance department head experiences and developmental experiences in educational institutions.

Although methodological limitations are common, autoethnography presents particular complications that impact the interpretation of findings. For example, using personal experience without controls or experimental

data for additional verification, the findings are not statistically generalisable because they originate from a sample of solely my experiences, without applying quantitative measures or using a sizeable qualitative sample. Despite these limitations, autoethnography can offer novel insights and contribute to scholarly discourse: It finds value in the self-reflexive moments of life, using personal experience as an investigative vehicle for exploring a phenomenon that also occurs in broader society, prompting the author, reader, or both to learn new information or ways of seeing (Adams et al., 2015; Bochner and Ellis, 2016; Poulos, 2021).

I modified the identities of other individuals to safeguard their privacy. The following two-part autoethnography addresses some of my experiences as an interim department head in 2018. The first part focuses on how I became an interim department head; the second part addresses the recruitment challenges I faced as an interim department head.

3. PART ONE — BECOMING AN INTERIM DEPARTMENT HEAD

I was an associate professor (i.e. senior lecturer) at a publicly-funded regional teaching university in the United States. I began teaching there in 2001 and earned a promotion and tenured position (i.e. a permanent position) in 2008. A budget cut decreased conference travel from \$1000 to \$500 per faculty member in our school. Consequently, I chose to only participate in conferences within driving distance of my home to reduce costs. This led me to attend a conference in Orlando, Florida, in early January of 2018 to present a paper. While driving home, I received a call from Fabian, the dean of my college. This was unexpected – school was officially on break. I thought there might be an emergency, so I answered the call. Fabian began discussing the unusually cold weather and other random topics. Then he said, 'I am going to tell you something. Please do not discuss it with anyone else until there is an official announcement.' These ominous words would mark the first indication that I would join the administration within the next 24 hours.

Fabian revealed he was no longer dean, having accepted the interim vice president (VP) position. In the changes that would follow, he wanted me to become an interim department head. I congratulated Fabian but questioned why my involvement was necessary. He mentioned that he was promoting Thea, my department's current head, to the interim dean, so he offered me her role. This news confused me even more. Why would Thea become interim dean when there were existing associate and assistant deans? I wondered. Fabian explained that the associate dean had refused the interim dean position, stating that she was already at capacity for her current position. Likewise, the assistant dean was already committed to working on accreditation activities and wanted to avoid shouldering additional responsibility. I liked Thea; she was capable and shielded the department from administrative minutia as much as possible, but I did

not want her job. I just wanted to be a faculty member, not a faculty member and department head.

I asked if another person could step in as interim department head. Fabian responded that some had already refused, others had untenured (i.e. temporary) positions, and the rest had interpersonal issues that made them less palatable options. I then asked Fabian how long the interim chair position would last. He was unsure but estimated six to twelve months. I mentioned that I needed to discuss this proposal with my spouse before deciding, and Fabian asked me to follow up with him within a day. Chris, my spouse, wanted to know how the role would impact my pay and time. It came with a small salary bump – \$2,500 – and a one-class release, reducing my teaching load from three to two classes. Regarding workload, I estimated that the department head job would take a ‘little’ more time, but the class release would likely offset much of it. Fabian had also been flexible with me in the past, so I decided that I would not refuse the position. I wanted to be a team player and a helpful colleague in a time of need.

After speaking with Chris, I half-heartedly agreed to serve as the interim department head. Within a few days, a meeting took place to announce the change officially. Fabian was now an interim VP, Thea was the interim dean, and I was the interim department head. Fabian gave an eloquent speech that spoke to the occasion; Thea discussed the importance of pulling together as a family to maintain the functioning and productivity of the school; I spoke of the surprise of being in this position and the importance of persevering through this challenging time. A colleague later commented that my face looked more aggrieved than excited.

4. PART TWO — HIRING CHALLENGES

I was anticipating a one-class reduction in my teaching load so that I would have more time to learn about my new position as department head. However, I first needed to locate a part-time assistant lecturer to cover one management class. Finding one had been easy in the past – the minimum requirement for a part-time lecturer was 18 graduate course hours in management, which all students with MBA degrees would have had. However, a marketing lecturer unexpectedly resigned two days before the first class. As such, what began as a search to cover a single management class expanded to include three marketing classes. I asked Thea for access to the job bank so that I could fill these positions quickly, but no job bank existed.

Lacking other options, I forfeited my one-class reduction and taught the management class. I did not want to place an overload burden on existing faculty, and the usual part-time lecturers in management were unavailable. This decision enabled me to focus on hiring personnel for marketing classes. I emailed PhD candidates in the local area, posted notices on discipline-specific career boards, and contacted former marketing faculty members, but to no avail – given the accreditation requirements and the

city’s small size, finding someone with 18 graduate hours in marketing on short notice to teach classes face-to-face proved impossible. I asked the associate dean to convert the in-person classes to an online format and pay more than the standard \$4,000, but because the classes had been face-to-face up to that point, she believed the classes needed to remain that way. She also did not want to deviate from the standard pay policy. Eventually, I exhausted all other options and covered the marketing classes with existing faculty on overload, a less-than-ideal short-term fix.

Later that semester, an official search to fill two marketing positions with lecturers or senior lecturers involved several tedious steps. Between crafting position advertisements and satisfying all stakeholders, we needed approval from several levels of the university hierarchy to determine where to advertise. Applicants were required to have terminal degrees in marketing from AACSB-accredited universities and demonstrate active professional service. In addition, they needed to either be newly minted PhDs or have at least two publications and presentations in the past five years. The university only paid to advertise for one week in one of a limited number of publications, none of which included the typical discipline-specific publications usually viewed by marketing candidates. Additionally, human resources (HR) did not inform the department when the advertisement would appear in the magazine, so I intermittently checked to see if it was there. Eventually, it appeared.

Saylor took the helm of the search committee. Although she had previously demonstrated a solid understanding of expectations, when I asked her for status updates on the search, she gave only vague responses, a pattern that persisted for months. Eventually, as the semester approached its end, I realised that Saylor would soon be on holiday with no results to show. I asked the associate dean if there would be any consequences for Saylor’s behaviour. She mentioned that I could write critical comments on Saylor’s evaluation, but she might perceive it as punitive. I chose not to leave them because I was busy and had not previously had any issues with her. Saylor was my colleague, but I was also her supervisor, and I felt torn serving in this administrative role while being a faculty member.

The search committee eventually recommended three applicants, two of whom lacked terminal degrees in marketing, any recent marketing research, or active service records, and one with a degree in marketing and some service but had not published research in seven years. Subsequent conversations with search committee members revealed no meeting—just an email request to confirm the slate of candidates Saylor had handpicked. She believed they were acceptable and wanted to proceed with campus interviews. I shared my concerns with Thea and the associate dean, who were both uncomfortable with all the committee’s candidates. Before this, I had reviewed the applicant pool and shared my top three candidates based on the established criteria.

Although they felt my selections were better than the committee's, they only wanted to pursue one person, and this candidate had already accepted a position with a nearby institution when I contacted him. He mentioned that he had been highly interested in the position, but the lack of communication led him to pursue other options.

After discussing the search efforts with Thea and the associate dean, I thanked Saylor for heading the committee. I informed her that the search process was concluding and that I had a new charge to find visiting faculty positions, a process that did not require an official search process. She responded that I had wasted her time and violated the search process. She did not address how her action or inaction had affected this outcome. I had a pleasant rapport with Saylor before I became department head. I had never imagined any conflict between us, so this was a dispiriting experience. I did not want a temporary job to permanently impact the quality of my work relationships with peers.

I eventually located a marketing candidate who was not a US citizen. When I asked for assistance with understanding the hiring process for this candidate, I struggled to locate an HR representative who could explain the steps. It was common for other academic institutions to hire foreign nationals. Why was this university flummoxed about international hires? I wondered. When I finally located a knowledgeable person, it was too late for the candidate to complete the documentation enabling her to work legally in the country. This substantial endeavour was ultimately for naught – I still needed to find and hire qualified marketing faculty.

I spent that summer continuing the search for visiting marketing faculty. I convinced a visiting senior lecturer in marketing to stay if she received a pay increase, and I provided an official contract to her in advance. This required Thea's approval, which took longer than anticipated due to a university budget issue that Thea resolved moments before the start of the school year. Then, networking with a colleague, I identified a visiting assistant lecturer in marketing to cover the remaining classes. However, some faculty members were uncomfortable with her educational pedigree and expressed concern that I was not actively seeking faculty input on these visiting positions. It was infuriating to hear these comments because they had provided no viable alternatives.

As if the marketing search were not consuming enough time, I also needed to cover several classes for management faculty members who unexpectedly took leaves of absence. The search for management coverage was cumbersome but less stressful than filling the marketing roles. Through collaboration with administrators and faculty, I covered all management classes with existing faculty – who would teach extra classes – or utilising support staff with graduate degrees as part-time assistant lecturers. However, this precipitated unexpected technical issues – support staff

were already university employees, but they lacked authorisation to open the websites used to record attendance and grades. Thus, I had to enter grades and record attendance for these staff, further burdening my workload. However, it remained unclear how we could get support staff who were part-time assistant lecturers access to the websites needed. I eventually learnt that a rule required everyone to undergo training before obtaining website access. This mandate was onerous because the training only occurred during the day, and these staff members worked full-time university jobs. They understandably did not want to use vacation or sick leave to complete training. When I ponder these roadblocks, I note the irony that although the university espoused the importance of customer service, part-time lecturer onboarding was frustrating and unwelcoming for all involved.

Given the recruitment challenges, I created a list of people who had previously expressed interest in serving as part-time assistant lecturers and lecturers. After several calls, I spoke with an HR representative about the prospect of establishing a job bank with this list, and the response was that a job bank was not currently possible due to system constraints. However, HR was in the midst of piloting a job bank that I could use in the future. I also asked about allowing website access to support staff who had accepted jobs as part-time assistant lecturers before they completed the official system training. She told me to contact the people in charge of those systems. Although the last thing I wanted was to make even more phone calls, I did, and after many messages, I learnt that there was no access to those systems before completing that training. No exceptions. Confounded by red tape, I longed for the days of simply being a faculty member.

Several months later, the interim dean, Thea, returned to her old position as department head, freeing me to return to my full-time faculty position with no administrative duties. Upon hearing the news, I was in a state of sublime, unadulterated bliss – it was finally over. I could finally leave the scene of this 'administrative accident' and fade into administrative oblivion.

5. THE CONNECTION BETWEEN MY AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND LITERATURE ON DEPARTMENT HEADS

A key element distinguishing an autoethnography from a story is the connection between autoethnography and the relevant literature on the core experiences articulated by the writer (Poulos, 2021). My experience as a senior lecturer and interim department head with scant training and development is not unique and does not exist in a vacuum – it is symbolic of a training and development gap that exists at many educational institutions. This commonality is something that I missed when I previously wrote about being an interim department head (Murphy, 2022). For example, the challenge of meeting promotion requirements while performing department head responsibilities prompted Gmelch et al. (2017) to advise

people to defer acceptance of a department head role until they reach the rank of full professor. Furthermore, the literature on department heads depicts an extensive training deficit and suggests the implementation of ongoing, relevant developments to increase the knowledge and effectiveness of these individuals. The department head role is a common, first-line administrative position that frequently includes recruiting faculty, scheduling classes, evaluating department members, assessing curriculum, and managing budgets (Gmelch and Miskin, 2011); this work is critical to maintaining the well-being of educational institutions. However, training for this vital position is lacking. For example, according to Weaver et al. (2019), about 40% of department heads do not undergo orientation at the beginning of their tenure, and less than 30% have leadership training after becoming heads. Gmelch et al. (2017) recounted training gaps in entry-level academic administrative positions: Only about 33% of department heads receive leadership training at the start, and 40% of that training totals four hours or less. Regarding desired improvements, department heads want training in managing budgets, resolving conflicts, and managing their time to build their leadership capacity (Gmelch et al., 2017). Likewise, Berdrow (2010) found that department heads' onboarding and ongoing development require improvement. Her research led to the creation of a programme to prepare incoming department heads for their new roles, alterations to an existing initiative to better support experienced department heads, and the development of a one-year timeline to address the transition of incoming and outgoing department heads.

For Floyd and Dimmock (2011), based on research in the United Kingdom, the transition in roles from faculty member to department head is a change in identity and work demands, prompting the development of a department head typology. Specifically, they categorised department heads into 'jugglers', 'copers', and 'strugglers' depending on their context (Floyd and Dimmock, 2011). Jugglers revel in the department head role, successfully balance the competing demands of their faculty and administrative identities, and often express a desire to pursue other administrative roles. Copers take less intrinsic delight in the department head role than jugglers but intend to stay. Strugglers, for whom conflict between roles is unpalatable, dislike being heads and want to transition away from the administrative position that does not align with their academic identity. Floyd and Dimmock (2011) suggest ongoing development, protected time, and the creation of an official deputy department head role to reduce the role conflict produced by concurrently serving as a faculty member and administrator. Floyd's (2016) later work proposes that universities engage in 'institutional neglect' regarding the training and development of department heads and calls for individualised initiatives that meet their ongoing needs. Elsewhere, Thornton et al. (2018), observing the competing tensions between various stakeholders and the need to balance faculty and administrative demands

in New Zealand, questioned whether a department head role is more of a 'holy grail' or a 'poisoned chalice'.

Gonaim (2016) has described department heads as performing critical work for a university but likens their work to that of a 'lifeguard without a life jacket' because of their limited preparation before and while holding the role of department head. Because department heads can find the various work and life demands stressful, they must have tools to learn how to build competency and reduce tension (Gmelch et al., 2017). Ruben et al. (2017) compared faculty members to pilots and department heads to air traffic controllers, suggesting that training is an important bridge to ease the transition for faculty members into administrative roles. Such training can focus on expanding the perspective of faculty members from that of individual contributors to managers whose focus must include the collective performance of the department and its assortment of stakeholders (Ruben et al., 2017).

The work of Freeman et al. (2020) centres on how department heads dwell in liminality, existing between one world encompassing faculty member responsibilities and another comprising administrative duty. Their research suggests that even when faculty hail from disciplines associated with adeptness at leadership (e.g. educational leadership, management), they would benefit from a culture that exemplifies maintaining an appropriate work-life balance, mentoring, and leadership development. Elsewhere, Freeman et al. (2020) suggest that universities use preparation programmes to expose interested faculty to the department head role or similar positions.

Baker et al. (2019) noted a metaphorical leak in the leadership pipeline that runs from the department head or centre director level to that of the division chief or assistant dean. These observations prompted recommendations that universities seal this leak by becoming more proactive in succession planning by identifying candidates for current and future leadership positions and instituting ongoing developmental programming, which occurs over time, not through single events (Baker et al., 2019). In their Canadian study, Armstrong and Woloshyn (2017) expressed no surprise at this leaky pipeline, with few existing heads in their study wishing to hold higher administrative positions and most planning to return to their faculty positions when their terms ended due to workloads, competing demands, and policy constraints.

Wolverton et al. (2005) compared succession management in corporations and educational institutions, arguing that universities have much to learn and execute regarding the systematic identification and development of organisational talent. In addition, they suggested that academic institutions take cues from corporate institutions by providing ongoing development before elevating individual contributors (e.g. faculty members) to managers (e.g. department heads), recognising that the department heads in their study ultimately regretted not

knowing more about the various legal, time management, budgeting, and people management issues before taking on their position.

In the preceding sections, I have expounded on my experience becoming an interim department head through the lens of autoethnography. This approach and findings from the literature on similar department head experiences underscore the need for ongoing training and development. Of particular note is the startling imagery of department chairs as jugglers, copers, or strugglers; as recipients of a 'holy grail' or poisoned chalice; as lifeguards without life jackets or air traffic controllers; and as individuals who exist between two worlds as part of a leaky pipeline (Baker et al., 2019; Floyd and Dimmock, 2011; Freeman et al., 2020; Gonaim, 2016, Thornton et al., 2018). The research reviewed vividly captures what I experienced as an interim department head.

The literature review and my autoethnography align—they both illustrate a gap in training and development (i.e. preparation). If I place my experiences within these authors' categorisations or analogies, I was primarily a struggler – the department head position was unwanted and one I attempted to elude (Floyd and Dimmock, 2011). Although I received positive performance feedback, the emotional labour of holding this position drained myself and my family, and the lack of institutional investment in training and development pushed me into choppy waters, where I might equally have sank or swam (Floyd, 2016; Gonaim, 2016). Furthermore, using the comparison made by Ruben et al. (2017), trying to satisfy faculty members' multi-directional needs and concerns while running a department felt adjacent to being an air traffic controller. Likewise, existing simultaneously as a faculty member and administrator with little authority to make substantial change was a dauntingly liminal experience (Freeman et al., 2020). I did not fully address my faculty responsibilities of teaching, research, and service while department head: my poor time management skills and the steep learning curve I was on led to a focus on administrative meetings, reports, recruitment, evaluations, and schedules. Thus, what might have looked like the beginning of my ascent to an administrative holy grail of success did not feel that way (Thornton et al., 2018). If my experience is in any way representative of the training and development gap noted in the literature on department chairs, the leaky pipeline of leadership in educational institutions will continue to drip (Armstrong and Woloshyn, 2017; Baker et al., 2019). Although most of this literature review concerns research from the United States, it also includes works from the United Kingdom, Canada, and New Zealand.

6. SELF-REFLEXIVE ANALYSIS — LEARNING THEMES

According to Dewey (1933), it is a misnomer that human beings learn from experience— more accurately, people learn from reflecting on experiences. In their management education programme, Thomassen and Jorgensen (2021) emphasise the importance of using

Dewey's (1933) suggested action, inquiry, and reflection practices. A key component of autoethnography is reflexive analysis, which sees one contemplate an experience to understand what happened more deeply through an iterative cycle of reflection on past experiences, writing and revising until the discovery of a new understanding previously unknown to the author. When I last wrote about my work as an interim department chair, I viewed this experience as an 'administrative accident' that 'happened' to me (Murphy, 2022). In contrast, writing this autoethnography prompted me to uncover my agency in holding the role of interim department head. As a result, I reframed my experience as a department head from an 'administrative accident' to an 'administrative experiment'. Three themes summarise what I have learnt: conditions of acceptance for future administrative experiences, an exit strategy before accepting a position, and 'North Star' faculty leadership while working as a faculty member.

7. THEME ONE — CONDITIONAL ACCEPTANCE

Earlier in this paper, I likened this self-reflection on my time as department head to my returning to the scene of an 'administrative accident', an experience I did not want to repeat. Conducting an autoethnography shifted this sentiment: I realised that my negative experiences were a combination of my unplanned ascent to the position, the teaching overload, and a lack of training and development. Having revisited and reframed my experiences, I am open to rejoining the administration, provided I do so with considerable planning. When there is an opening for a department chair at my institution, I will apply for it while specifying my conditions of acceptance: leadership training, shadowing the current chair and receiving publication credit to offset the time taken away from research.

While drafting this paper, I discovered that the university system offers formal training for department chairs, which I could have attended when I was the interim department chair. Thea, the department chair, did not withhold this information – she was similarly unaware of the opportunity. Administrative training is not normative in our school. This suggests a need for automated communication between the university system and individual educational institutions to relay the availability of system-wide training opportunities. The department head literature shows that many educational institutions have training and development gaps. Establishing a new standard where training and development are normative experiences is necessary. Perhaps this is best addressed through university and school accreditation agencies altering existing training and development requirements for member institutions.

After writing this paper, I also identified in-person and remote department head conferences and other learning opportunities outside the university system. Suppose I receive an offer for a department head position in the

future. In that case, I will request an annual training experience for this role to bolster my effectiveness, deepen my understanding of educational leadership, and enhance my awareness of institutional functions. This request signals the importance that I place on mastering my grasp of the department head role and can ensure that training costs are protected from possible budget cuts if included as part of the offer letter.

Training and development do not have to be formal or external to an organisation. They can exist as department chair manuals, checklists that identify crucial tasks (e.g. reports, key contact people, deadlines, and potential landmines to navigate), realistic job previews, and job shadowing before leadership transitions to new roles (Chu, 2021). Shadowing for a role can include observing key meetings, gaining access to reports, receiving a checklist of essential tasks with deadlines, and being officially introduced to key stakeholders outside of the school (e.g. a responsive contact person for the registrar's office, HR staff, and building maintenance). For both Berdrow (2010) and Wolverton et al. (2005), shadowing and other types of development should occur for about a year. If I receive a future offer for a department head position, I plan to request one semester of shadowing as a condition of acceptance to ease the transition back into this role.

In retrospect, I recognise that I was a naïve interim department head. A one-class release is, perhaps unsurprisingly, insufficient to offset the demands of an administrative position. If I become a department head again, I will request that each year of department head service counts as one refereed publication to address the liminal work of a department head as both an administrator and a scholar. In 2018, I focused on my head duties and teaching to the exclusion of my research responsibilities as a faculty member. Having each year of service as an administrator count as a refereed publication would reduce this tension.

Conditional acceptance will be informed by the inclusion (in the acceptance letter) of funding incorporated for training, job shadowing, and publication credits. These requirements will ensure that I am prepared to serve as an administrator and attend to my teaching, research, and service responsibilities as a faculty member.

8. THEME TWO — EXIT STRATEGY

This theme pertains to establishing an exit strategy before starting any new position. While interim chair, I had an external exit strategy: I agreed to stay in the position until they found a permanent replacement. While I had a day to decide on the interim department head position and could have asked for more time to consider how long I wanted this role, how it fit with my career goals, and how it would impact my family, I did not design an exit strategy going into the position. I own this lapse in judgement – the position did not happen to me without my involvement; I chose to accept it without engaging in proper self-reflection. I did not have to take the role or

remain an interim department chair until a permanent replacement appeared, yet I behaved as if there had been some requirement to accept the position. I see now that I should have implemented the internal exit strategy of accepting the role for a single semester. This would have allowed me to gain enough information to determine whether I wanted to leave or renegotiate the conditions under which I would remain. This would also have given the administration time to actively search for a department head or prepare someone else for the role.

I now know the importance of reflection before accepting a new role, respectfully sharing my needs, and declining the position if those offering the role refuse my request for more decision-making time. If I receive an offer to become a department head again, I will accept the role for three years while focusing on cultivating others, recognising the critical need for a deep faculty leadership bench, which begins with the department head fertilising the soil where leaders can grow. I intend to provide faculty opportunities to further their career development and facilitate the transition when I leave before pursuing an administrative position focused on faculty development.

9. THEME THREE — 'NORTH STAR' FACULTY LEADERSHIP

Finally, writing this autoethnography, joining an affinity group at my institution, and a solitary walk on a starry night compelled me to contemplate a purpose for my next career phase. I term this purpose 'North Star' faculty leadership, representing the final self-reflexive learning theme. Hundreds of years before the advent of global positioning satellites (GPS), explorers navigated utilising stars in the sky (Stein, 2022). They used Polaris, also known as the North Star, as an indication of true north to guide their travels (Stein, 2022). Given the potency of this star, it is no surprise that Black (2019) suggests that leaders operate from their North Star or purpose, not external standards of what they should do imposed by outside actors. My North Star faculty leadership results from three cycles: self-reflection, interaction, and refinement. Self-reflection includes engaging in autoethnography to discover projects of personal importance and taking nascent steps to enact them. Interaction involves career discussions with key others. My interaction cycle occurred in a mid-career faculty affinity group. Our conversations veered away from absolutes, obligations, and expectations. We relentlessly leaned into uncovering what was personally meaningful and moved towards more affirming career choices. Refinement focuses on more actively pursuing career opportunities that are compatible with our purpose. This step enabled me to navigate more smoothly towards significant activities and distance myself from inconsequential pursuits. Organisations can create relevant affinity groups and infuse appropriate developmental practices into reflection, interaction and refinement cycles.

What does 'North Star' faculty leadership resemble? At present, and until I take on an administrative role, this form of leadership involves seeking out experiences, positions, or projects of personal importance that do not include an official administrative title but employ my existing leadership skills. This approach to leadership led me to become the current chair of my school's curriculum committee. When the former chair left the institution, I volunteered to assume the role, which I would not have done before I began writing this autoethnography. I knew which practices needed improvement because I was already a committee member. As a result, I created a website to share files and enhance communication and utilised DocuSign to sign and track documents. This position is outside my comfort zone – the paperwork is periodically daunting, and I am still learning the procedures and key players. However, it is rewarding to discover new things, interact with people outside of my silo, and feel accomplished in my work. It is a fresh challenge with impact.

The following practice of North Star faculty leadership will see me take a long overdue sabbatical. It took serving on a university sabbatical committee to realise that I had failed to apply for my second sabbatical. This seven-year oversight exemplifies my prior lack of self-reflexivity. I am using my sabbatical to pursue an HR certification and publish research in pursuit of becoming a full professor in three years. While I acknowledge that the pay increase associated with the rank of full professor is an appealing prospect, what also draws me to the role is my eagerness to engage more fully in faculty governance during the next phase of my career, which an increase in rank makes more likely (Eddy and Ward, 2015).

10. CONCLUSIONS

According to Raab (2013), transpersonal relevance is a critical component of autoethnography. It occurs when the author and reader learn from the autoethnography or when it enhances an element of their lives. In this paper, I have shared my autoethnography, connected it to existing literature, and shared self-reflexive themes. The work of previous scholars corresponds with my experiences, emphasising the need for ongoing training and development for department heads. This self-reflexive approach prompted me to alter my perspective on my past as a department head. I no longer view it as an 'administrative accident' that I should have avoided. Instead, I consider it an 'administrative experiment' that connected me to the importance of self-reflection.

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If readers are contemplating transitions to administrative careers, I recommend exploring conditions of acceptance, exit strategies, and their version of 'North Star' faculty leadership before accepting new positions. A self-reflexive approach can facilitate identifying what is critical for success, how long to stay, and practices that enable meaningful faculty leadership until desirable administrative positions become available.

If readers are already department heads, I extend an urgent plea. Help develop faculty and fix the leaky administrative pipeline – let go of one less critical activity and take on an initiative to prepare faculty for planned and unexpected roles as administrators or faculty leaders. For example, introduce committee assignments, short-term job shadowing of current administrators, quarterly workshops, or offsite training. Alternatively, add a mentoring moment as a standing agenda item in department meetings to aid in the development of others. All these actions can ease future transitions from faculty to administration and help to repair this leak.

If readers are deans or provosts, I have three petitions to support faculty and department heads – incentivise development, implement career conversations and establish affinity groups. The first petition is to reward department heads based on the percentage of their faculty who complete developmental activities. The incentives include money, course reductions, graduate assistants, promotions, plaques, and public recognition. Before establishing this reward, ensure faculty development is a substantial component of the department head evaluation. Incentives and evaluations might form a reinforcing cycle that supports faculty growth, making fertile ground for future administrators. The second appeal is to enact a policy that deans have two meetings a year – autumn and winter – with department heads who have not obtained the rank of full professor. Before the first meeting, department heads should formulate three-year career plans that chart pathways towards achieving full professor status or other administrative positions. The plans should also identify resources that support the department heads' holistic development – skills, technology, training, affinity groups, self-reflection, and work-life balance. In these meetings, deans can provide developmental feedback and allocate resources that support their development. The third appeal is to create affinity groups for current department chairs and faculty who are possibly interested in an administrative career path – curate networking, self-reflexive and developmental experiences that address their needs and interests.

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